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BUDDHIST GEOGRAPHY

OF

ANCIENT NEPAL

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DHARMODAYA SABHA

THE FOURTH WORLD BUDDHIST CONFERENCE

KATHMANDU, NEPAL.

Serial No. 39 2,500 Annas -/4/-
(/30)

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BUDDHIST GEOGRAPHY OF ANCIENT NEPAL

Nepal, nestling quietly in the lap of the holy Himalaya, has been regarded as a very sacred place from time immemorial. Both the Brahmin and Buddhist priests, while reciting lines from the holy texts to receive gifts from their beneficiaries, mention the country as lying in the Himalayan region. No wonder, therefore, that the fair Valley of Nepal, shrouded in legends, myths and mysteries, has become the home of gods from the hoary antiquity. At every step and turn, one encounters temples, stupas and pagodas of different sizes and designs, some in austere simplicity of style, some in rich architectural beauty and others in a happy blending of Buddhism and Hinduism. The visitor holds his breath in a thrill of rapturous wonder. Nepal. indeed, is a name to conjure with, and there is a restless magic in its very syllables. It offers a virgin field of research to the naturalist. Its unique art and architecture appeal to others. But to the teeming millions of Buddhists in all lands, the holy rising ground of Lumbini, where Asoka set up for ever his pillar to witness that "the Blessed One was born" there, has the most indelible impression and a sense of supreme happiness. Nepalese Buddhists regard every inch of the land as holy, but the most sacrosanct is the hillock of Swayambhunath on the western side of the present City of Kathmandu. Here the Lord of the Universe appeared for the first time in the form of Celestial Light in the centre of a lotus flower. The lotus bulb was sown by Vipaswi Buddha in Naghrad, Lake of Serpants, the name by which the Valley was known before its pent-up water was made to flow out in the Treta Yuga by the Boddhisattva Manjusri the Buddhist saint from China. The Swayambhu hillock has been known by different names in different ages. namely, Padmagiri in the Satya Yuga, Vajrakuta in the Treta Yuga, Goshringa Parbat in the Dwapar Yuga and Gopuchha Parbat in the Kali Yuga. *The Vrihat Swayambhu Puran* gives a graphic description of its ideal

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woodland beauty ; the wood abounded with all sorts of wild animals and looked gay with beautiful fragrant flowers and medicinal herbs.

In the Satya Yuga Vipaswi Buddha came from a city called Bandhumati and made his stay at a mountain called Jatmatrochha, now known as Nagarjun. He foretold his disciples about the celestial light which would kindle in the Valley and cast its illuminating rays to every dark corner of the world. He sowed a lotus bulb in the middle of the lake which later on blossomed forth with the Lord of the Universe in the center. He had a halo of light of transcendental beauty. People called Him Adi Buddha or Swayaambhunath, the God Supreme. Swayambhunath has since been a centre of attraction for the Buddhist saints, and has always attracted monks and nuns, and pilgrims from distant lands like Bhutan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, China, Japan, Mongolia Tibet, Denmark and Sweden.

Sikhi Buddha who came from the legendary town of Arunpuri, merged himself with the celestial light. Viswa-bhua Buddha came from the legendary country of Anupam in the Treta Yuga. He had with him a number of disciples to whom he pointed the place through which the water of the Naghrad could be made to flow out. Having thus fulfilled his much cherished desire of seeing the Celestial Light, he went back to his Country. Boddhisattva Manjusri also came in the Treta Yuga all the way from Mahachina. He made a halt at the small hill or Mahamandop for three nights, one mile east of Bhaktapur. From Nahamandop he spied the glow of Swayambhu Light, and the idea of draining the lake flashed in his mind. So he went to the low hills on the southern side of the lake and installed the goddesses, Barada and Mokshada on Phulochha and Dhyanochha respectively. Then he cut through the mountain with the scimitar and let the water run out. He next created the hill named Padma and from there to Guheswari, he built a town called Manju Pattan. He allowed his disciples to settle down there as householders. He allotted Viharas

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to those who chose to remain there as Bhikshus. Then installing there a king named Dharmakar, he returned to China.

After his departure, his disciples built the Manjusri Chaitya near the Swayambhu Hillock on the 5th of Magh Sudi in token of the respect for their revered Guru.

According to the legend, Manjusri possessed great supernatural power. His austere penance raised him to the level of divinity, and his fame had spread far and wide. Once Dharmasri Misra, a Pundit of Vikram-sila Vihar who failed to interpret a twelve-letter mystic Mantra made up his mind to approach Manjusri in China for enlightenment on the problem. The Chinese saint knowing the mission of Dharmasari Misra by mystic insight, himself went to Nepal, and there he started to plough a field, having yoked for the purpose, a lion and a griffin. Dharmasri Misra was struck with wonder at that strange sight. However, he went up to the ploughman to ask him the way to China. Manjusri caused a good Vihar to spring up and the stranger was lodged there in for the night he overheard the conversation between the host and hostess from which the visitor concluded that his host was Manjusri himself in disguise. Next morning he fell at Manjusri's feet, who made him his disciple and told him the meaning of the *Mantra*. Dharmasri Misra went back happy beyond measure.

The Vihara created by Manjusri, and now known as Vikram-Sila Vihara, is identified with Thabahil on the northern skirt of the present Kathmandu City. The plot which Manjusri ploughed was called Sawa Bhumi and is the first field in the Valley to be planted with paddy every year.

The association of the Chinese saint with the birth of the fair Velley forms the first and the most vital link in the long historical relationship between China and Nepal. The relation though estranged in the first half of the 20th century, has now been happily re-established on the enduring basis of the Panchasila principles.

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Krokochhand Buddh, who also came in the Treta Yuga from Kashámbati, explained to his disciples the glory of Swayambhunath and Guheswari. He instructed them in the ways and doctrines of Grihasthis (householders) and Bhikshus (monks). While performing the initiation ceremony of the 700 of his disciples, he found no water there and made a hole by the thrust of his thumb on the side of the mountain. He prayed to Swayambhunath and Guheswari for water, and Ganga Devi appeared in corporal form to fill the font with crystal clear water. Then Ganga Devi changed her form into water and flowed downhill. The hole is now called Bagdwar, the source of the holy Bagmati river which flows through Kathmandu.

Krokochhand Buddha, apostle of Swayambhu and Guheswari, preached among the people the merit that would accrue from the worship of Swayamhhunath and Guheswari. He named the mountain Phulochha from where he went to Guheswari and saw there the forest planted by Manjusri. He prophesied that Pashupati would be a celebrated name in the Kaliyuga.

Krokochhand Buddha holds a high position in the Buddhist traditions. He is looked upon as a human manifestation of Vairochana, one of the five Dhyani Buddhas. He is also known as Samantabhadra in his celestial emanation. He has his position in the centre of the stupa. His consort is Bajradhatiswari.

Kanak Muni Buddha came from the city of Sobhabati in the Dwapar Yuga. He was so ardent a devotee of Swayambhu and Guheswari that he preached the cult of Swayambhu worship even to Indra when he ascended Heaven.

Kanak Muni, alse known as Akshobya, is one of the Pancha Buddhas. In his celestial emanation he is known as Vajrapani. His position lies in the east part of the stupa. His consort is Lochana.

Kanak Muni was followed by Kasyapa Buddha from Varanasi. After visiting the shrines of Swayambhunath

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and Guheswari, he went to Bengal and directed its king Prachand Deva to go to Swayambhu *Chhetra* in Nepal to be the disciple of Gunakar Bhikshu, a follower of Manjusri. He prescribed to him an austere mode of living—strict celebacy and intensive study of the Shastras. The King, abdicating the throne in favour of his son, went to Nepal to fulfil his solemn vow. When Prachand Deva became a teacher, he changed his name to Shantisri. Foreseeing the advent of the Kali Yuga, in which the world would be sin-ridden, he covered the Swayambhu light with a stone and built a chaitya over it. He was subsequently beatified as a saint.

Kashyap, one of the five Dhyani Buddhas, is called Ratnasambhava in his human manifestation. He is Ratnapani in his celestial emanation. His position in a stupa is in the south. His consort is Mamaki. Most of the people in the Valley trace their descent from him and so professed the Kashyap sib, i-e-the *gotra*.

Dipankar Buddha once appeared in human form to accept the humble alms of an old woman in preference to the rich gift of Raja Subarnand. When asked for the reason, he said her alms had been colleeted with much greater labour than the king's gold. This set the Raja thinking. And seeing a blacksmith working with profuse sweat, he went to work along with him. and spent his hard-earned wage to buy gifts for beggars. Dipankar Buddha appeared and accepted his alms first and then blessed him. He told the king that salvation in the Kali Yuga would be obtained only through the worship of Buddha. The king built the chaitya Dipavati, still extant in Patan, in commemoration of the event. People still celebrate the Panchadan (alms-giving ceremony) on the 8th Shrawan Sukla specially by worshipping Buddha.

Sakya Muni, one of the five Dhyani Buddhas came to Nepal during the reign of the Kirati King, Jitedasti. He visited the Swayambhu Chaitya, Manjusri Chaitya and other holy shrines,. While in the Valley, he lodged at

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Puchhagra Chaitya to the west of the Swayambhu Hill. There he accepted the offerings of Chuda, a local nun.

Sakyamuni, the most predominating of the five Dhyani Buddhas, is also known as Amitabha. He is called Avalokiteswara in his celestial emanation. His position in the stupa is in the west. His consort is Pandara.

His most favourite disciple Maitreya, the future Buddha, is the last of Pancha Buddhas. Maitreya is also called Amoghasiddha. He is known as Visvapani in his celestial emanation. His position in the stupa lies in the north. His consort is Tara.

The five Dhyani Buddhas have their own distinctive features, posses, mudras, symbols, attributes and apparels. Their sphere of influence and activities spread, to different eras.

The Valley is replete with many Buddhist holy Shrines and places, the most well-known are the following ;—

Swayambhunath :-Its top where the Stupa stanas, is reached by a stony staircase of about 400 steps. The height is about 250 feet above the level of the Valley. There are colossal statues of Sakys Sinha at the foot of the staircase. At the top of the staircase is a circular erection about 3 feet high covered with brass, and bearing a large gilt Vajra, the thunderbolt of Indra, which resembles the double-shaped sceptre. Around the large and stupendous dome-shaped Stupa, with its huge mystic eyes on each cardinal point. are numerous small temples, shrines, bells, and prayer-wheels fixed between the railings. The place is much frequented by Newars and Tibetans, as the place of Puja and picnic by the former and of pilgrimage by the latter. The temple of Harti (guardian deity of the Valley-children), Buddhist monasteries and peace grottos surrounding it add to the beauty of the spot. One can have a bird's eye view of the Valley below towards the east, and enjoy the grand view of the Himalaya with its sky-high snow peaks towards the north.

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Guheswari :—The lotus plant, which revealed the Lord in its centre, which had its root at Guheswari near Deopatan, is a *Kunda* of unfathomable depth. Hindus regard Guheswari as the Divine Consort of Pashupati. Is is a beauty spot in the Valley, and forms an ideal picnic place for holiday-makers.

Deopatan :—Noted in early history the place where Charumati, Asoka's daughter, married a local chief and settled down as a staunch devotee of Buddhism. She founded the Charumati Vihar, popularly known as Chabahil.

Bodhnath :—Bodhnath, half a mile north-east of Deopatan, resembles Swayambhunath in its general conception. The difference, however, lies in the terraces which have been built round the central dome and the multiplicity of Tantric deities of the Vajrayan cult lying in niches all round the dome. The Stupa is much frequented by pilgrims from Tibet, Mongolia and China, who regard it as the holiest of the Buddhist shrines.

According to the *Vansavali*, the Stupa was built by Bhupkesahari to expiate the sin of patricide. King Vikram Keshari was much grieved at seeing his father's memorial (the Narayan fountain) becoming dry. Astrologers whom he consulted told him that nothing short of the sacrifice of a man endowed with thirty-two regal attributes would make the fountain flow. He, therefore, called his own son Bhup Keshari and ordered him to kill straight-away a man whom he should find lying covered over on the fountain. He carried out his father's behest. Blood rushed out from the fountain, and the croacodile on it turned back its head from the ghastly crime. Leaving the charge of government to mother, the guilty prince went to Bajra Jogini to expiate his sin. Seeing him overwhelmed with grief, the Jogini enjoined him that he could expiate the sin by buiding a large Bnddhist stupa, the spot which would be indicated by the perching of a crane which was let off from the mountain of the Jogini. The bird alighted on the spot for the stupa. The site was marked and the work was taken in hand.

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When the stupa was under construction, there was said to be a long drought, so that the workman making the bricks could get water only by soaking clothes in the beds of the stream and wringing out the moisture for water.

Bajra Jogini :—Four miles farther towards the north-east is Sankhu. It is noted for the temples of Bajra Jogini and Khadga Jogini. Both Buddhists and Hindus flock to the temples. It is said that Sankaracharya could not proceed further than the base of the hillock on which these temples stand. So cowed down and blinded was he by their divine wrath that he had to cry a halt there aud offer a fervent prayer to the divine mothers for their pardon for his intrusion on their holy sanctuary. He regained his vision and had to go back discomfitted from his infamous mission of destroying Buddhism.

Manichur Lake :—Two miles north of the hillock of Bajra Jogini, there is the Manichur Lake. It was in this/-secluded place that Raja Manichur spent the rest of his life in practising austerities and performing the ceremony of Nirguna Yajna. He gave away as alms the Mani (jewel) out of his forehead.

Namobuddha :—The Namobuddha Chaitya lies in Eastern Nepal, approximately 24 miles east of Kathmandu. Sakya-muni visited the Namobuddha mountain during the course peregrenation in the Valley. He had carried out there, according to legends, an act of great piety and self-sacrifiice in his previous birth by offering his own body to feed a starving tigress lying apparently dead with her emaciated cubs sucking her withered nipples.

Bhaktapur :—Known as Bhatgoan, lies westward of the Namobuddha mountain. This historic city is specially famous for its Newar monuments of ancient culture. Nava Durgas, the guardian goddesses of the city reign hore all supreme. It is said Shankaracharya used the Bhaktapur as a base of operation in his ruthless campaign against Buddhism in the Valley. A few Vihara, which

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escaped his vandalism eloquently speak of the glory of the early Buddhistic monuments of this ancient city. Muni Vihara, chief among them, was built in honour of Sakya Muni's visit to Bhaktapur on his way to Namobuddha. Buddhists of Bhaktapur hold it very sacred and congregate there in all religious functions.

Patan :—Patan originally known as Lalitpur, is noted for the stupas raised by Asoka as a memorial of his visit to this holy city. These stupas are all round the city, situated at Ipi, Lagan, Teta and Pulchowk. Inspite of the long, long lapse of time, they rema;n almost in *Situ*. "These four guardian shrines" says "*Percival Landon*" are as remarkable as only simplicity carried to an extreme can make them. Like Karnak or stone-henge, they enmesh the visitor of Patan with the sense of being on sacred ground a sense that he will find it hard to shake off until he has turned his back upon this haunting sanctuary, has either returned to the modernity of Kathmandu, or has persued his way farther to some other of the many hundreds of holy places within the Valley". Chief among the many interesting Viharas of Patan are Rudra Varna Maha Vihar, Yampi Maha Vihara, Hiranya Maha Vihara.

Mahabodhi :—The Mahabodhi temple in the heart of the town is a reproduction of the Bodh Gaya temple. This temple, which was built by Abhaya Raja and his descendents, is *per se* a rich gem of art and architecture. Were it not for its cramped position and squalid surroundings, it would be one of the most remarkable monuments in Patan.

Machhindra Nath Temple :—The temple of Machhindra Nath, also called Lokenath, was built in 1408 A. D. It was originally a strictly Buddhist shrine dedicated to the incar. nation of Padmapani Lokeswar but it has taken to the hearts of all Nepalese, Buddhists and Hindus alike. Once a year the red image of the God is taken round the city of Patan in asky-piercing car. The Car Festival is witnessed by millions of pepole of Nepal. The dropping of a cocoanut

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from the spire of the car and the exhibition of the sacred vest are the most spectacular features of the festival.

The God was brought, says the legend, from Kamrup (Upper Assam) by Raja Narendra Dev, Bandhudatta Acharya and a farmer named Lalit of Patan. When the Valley faced a long drought, as the result of the Nagas having been crabbed and confined under the seat of Gorakhnath. who was infuriated by the ungenerous act of the Valley people, Goraknath at the approach of his tutor Machhindra rose from his seat to pay homage to his divine Master. The Nagas relieved from the confinement went back to their places and the people got the much-desired rain. So Machhindra, the Rain-God is worshipped as the tutalary deity of the Valley. For six months of the year the Rain-God is enshrined at Bungamati, a village two miles south of Patan, and for six months, at Patan.

There are hundreds of Viharas and shrines in the city of Kathmandu. 18 of the 86 Viharas are exclusively for the Vajracharyas, and the rest are for the use of Sakya Bhikshus.

Suratvajra Maha Vihar, (Taksha Bahal) at Asan Tole, Maitri pur Maha Vihar (Qua Bahal) at Thahity Tole, Srikhanda Mula Maha Vihar, (Sikhamukh Bahal) at Maru Tole), Manjusrinaka Maha Vihar, (Om Bahal) at Jore Ganesh Keshchandra Maha Vihar, (Itum Bahal) At Kilagal Tole, Bramha Chakra Maha Vihar, (Om Bahal) at Jore Ganesh, and Manishringa Maha Vihar, (Musum Bahal) at Brahma Tole, are the leading Viharas.

Matchhindra :—The White Matchhindra, prote type of the Rejus Matchhindra of Patan, lies in the heart of Kathmandu city. Its car Festival is held annually in the Kathmandu city. The holy precinct is called Kanaksundari Maha Vihar. In front of the shrine there stands a stupa said to have been built by Asoka. The worship of the god is believed to remove the course of sterility of women and give longivity to their children. White Matchhindra is also called Avalokiteswara.

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Vidhyadhori Jogini :—The shrine is accross the Bishnumati river. The new-wed Newar couples after wedding repair to her for seeking her blessings.

Swarnabhumi :—West of the Kathmandu City spreads Bhukhel Meadow, where all Buddhists gods and goddesses are invited in the performance of the Samyak ceremony. His Majesty King of Nepal along with the high state dignitaries attends the function as distinguished invitee.

Considering the whole aspect of the religious life of the Valley people, one finds that both Hinduism and Buddhism are flourishing side by side in a spirit of close comradarie, seldom coming into clash. The two creeds influence the life of the Nepalese without showing the least of *odium theologicum* among the people professing the two creeds.

It is but fitting that the Valley has been chosen to be the vanue of the Fourth Conference of the World Fellowship of Buddhists, 1956.

OM MANE PADME HUM !

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Thacker, Spink & Co (1933) Private Ltd., Calcutta. (India)